Stuck in Crisis

Media and Organizational Discourse on Foster Care and Transition Age Youth

FEBRUARY 2019

A FrameWorks Research Report

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Introduction

In recent years, advocates have made major strides in helping older youth in foster care thrive. Policies like the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008), which allow states to receive federal funds to support foster youth up to age 21, represent progress for transition age youth and indicate that this group's needs have moved higher and more visibly onto the legislative agenda of state and federal policymakers. It also reflects reflect a growing recognition that transition age youth need to develop meaningful, relevant skills and supports as they transition to adulthood and independence—and that the foster care system, and society generally, must support them as they do.

The public conversation about transition age youth, however, has not caught up with policy change. To strengthen support for transition age youth and to make existing improvements stick, gains in public understanding, public will, and public demand are needed. Discussions about transition age youth are inextricably bound up with broader public thinking about foster care, and as a recent FrameWorks report makes clear, the public holds unproductive perceptions of this issue.[1] People lack a basic understanding of the system and how it works, assume that youth in care are permanently scarred, and often draw upon toxic stereotypes of low-income communities and communities of color to explain who enters care and why.

Media coverage has an important role to play in shaping public attitudes and understandings. The news media act as information gatekeepers, amplifying certain kinds of messages and muting others. By repeating certain stories and frames, the news media shape people's beliefs, attitudes, and even policy preferences—a phenomenon referred to as the "drip, drip" effect.[2] Examining media frames explains why members of the public have such stable and patterned ways of thinking about social issues. In addition, understanding patterns in media framing will enable advocates to develop strategies to respond to and, over time, shift coverage in more productive directions.

The media, however, are not the public's sole source of information about issues related to the foster care system and transition age youth. Advocacy organizations, research organizations, direct service providers, and key funders also communicate directly with members of the public and indirectly via the media. This organizational "field" captures a range of relevant and influential groups that actively shape communications about transition age youth. And while their communications platforms are not as powerful or as popular as the media, they also disseminate issue frames that affect how the public thinks about and understands foster care. In

order for the field to understand how to improve its communications, and more effectively shape media coverage, it needs a clear picture of its current framing practices.

This report addresses two core goals: (1) to document and analyze the frames and storytelling approaches that shape media and organizational discourse around the foster care system and (2) to identify the likely implications this discourse has on public thinking. It provides experts and advocates with a detailed understanding of the discursive environment in which they operate and offers initial recommendations about how to move it in more productive directions.

This research was sponsored by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to develop an evidenced-based strategy for communicating more effectively about foster care and transition age youth. It is one piece of a larger project to design and test framing strategies that can deepen public understanding of what foster care is, how it works, and how it can be improved, including generating an understanding of the specific needs of youth who age out of the system.

Methods and Data

This research explores two key questions:

1. What storytelling and framing strategies do the news media and organizations in the field use to communicate about foster care and foster youth?
2. What are the implications of these stories for public thinking?

Media Sample

The media sample includes articles from a geographically diverse range of newspapers, including: *The Arizona Republic*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Boston Herald*, *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, *The Columbus Dispatch*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Denver Post*, *The Honolulu Star*, *The Houston Chronicle*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Daily News*, *The New York Times*, *The San Diego Union Tribune*, *The New Jersey Star Ledger*, *The Minnesota Star Tribune*, *The Tampa Bay Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post*.

Using LexisNexis, FrameWorks' researchers searched and downloaded articles from these sources using a search strategy designed to capture a broad range of topics related to the child welfare system, foster care, and foster youth.[3] Searches were limited to articles that appeared between September 5th, 2016, and September 5th, 2018. All articles were carefully reviewed by researchers, who removed those that did not deal substantively with foster care or that duplicated other articles (i.e., the same article appearing in multiple news outlets). This process resulted in a final sample of 215 articles, each of which was coded and analyzed.

Field Sample

The organizational sample was constructed via a multistage process. In collaboration with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, FrameWorks' researchers compiled a list of advocacy organizations, research organizations, direct service providers, and key funders working on and communicating about topics related to the foster care system and foster youth. These were supplemented by additional field organizations identified through an online search.

Researchers then sampled public-facing communications materials from each organization (e.g., press releases, reports, "About Us" webpages, and other communications). These materials were selected because they contained content about how each organization describes its work and

orientation to foster youth and foster issues. In total, researchers sampled 112 articles from 15 organizational websites: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Programs, Child Focus Inc., ChildrenNow, Children's Rights, Child Welfare League of America, First Place for Youth, Foster Children's Rights Coalition, Foster Coalition, iFoster, National Foster Youth Institute, The New York Foundling, Ready to Succeed, Together We Rise, and Youth Villages.

Analysis of Media and Organizational Materials

The analysis was designed to identify the dominant narratives circulating about the foster care system and foster youth. FrameWorks' researchers used the codebook below to perform quantitative coding that enumerated important narrative components of each document. This codebook was developed based on standard coding categories used in prior FrameWorks research, as well as in the framing literature more generally,[4] and was informed by research conducted as part of prior phases of this project.[5]

Table 1: Examples of Codes

NARRATIVE COMPONENT	BRIEF DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES OF CODES[6]
Demographics	What demographic groups are mentioned?	– Low-income adolescents – Children or adolescent immigrants – Children or adolescents of color – Child or adolescent boys/girls – LGBTQ children or adolescents
Care setting	What type of care context does the document describe?	– Kinship care – Licensed foster homes – Group homes or congregate care
Transition focus	Does the document discuss youth transitioning out of the foster care system?	– Yes/no – Aging out of the system – Return to birth family – Adoption
Challenge/problem	What challenges or needs of foster youth are described?	– Needs around transitioning out of system – Effects of trauma – Instability of caregivers or placements – Absence of supportive relationships – Failure of the foster care system – Lack of funding for the foster care system
Consequences	What are the implications of entry into foster care?	– Individual (e.g., positive and negative effects on mental and physical health, education, employment, relationships, criminality, etc.) – Societal (e.g., effects on the criminal justice system, economy, health care, etc.)

Solutions and policies	What is being—or should be—done to improve outcomes for foster youth?	– Solutions that support youth transitioning out of the system (e.g., extend eligibility for services, increase vocational, financial, educational, or housing supports) – Provide trauma-informed services – Punish failures in the system (e.g., firing social workers, holding system leaders accountable) – Preventive services
Messengers	Who are the people and/or organizations quoted in the document?	– Politicians, government officials – Parents – Youth with system experience – Spokespeople from specific organizations

After coding the data, the analysis proceeded in three stages:

- **Frequency analysis.** To begin, researchers examined how often each code appeared in media and organizational documents and calculated the percentage of materials within each sample that contained each individual code.

- **Qualitative frame analysis.** Next, researchers identified themes, trends, and patterns of meaning in the data. Informed by the frequency analysis, FrameWorks' researchers identified codes of interest for qualitative analysis (e.g., researchers explored how particular challenges within the foster care system are described). A random subsample of 50 percent of articles was selected for each code or code category and analyzed to identify dominant narratives. This analysis discerned patterns in what was *said* (documents' explicit language or content) and what was *implied* (ideas derived via interpretation and inference).

- **Cognitive analysis.** Finally, the findings from the steps above were interpreted against the backdrop of the public's deep assumptions and implicit understandings about the child welfare system and foster youth identified in prior stages of this research. This analysis explores how media and organizational frames (a) cue and reinforce existing ways of thinking among members of the public; (b) conflict with or challenge existing ways of thinking (i.e., cultural models), or (c) fail to address a topic, leaving people to "fill in the blanks" with existing patterns of thinking. This final analysis enables us to identify how frames embedded within materials are likely to affect public understanding of transition age youth.

Findings

This section of the report identifies the dominant framing strategies used by the media and the field to speak about issues related to the foster care system. Following each finding is a discussion of the implications these frames have on public thinking.

FINDING #1

In the media, child welfare is framed as a system in crisis.

The news media routinely describe the child welfare system as plagued by challenges, negligence, and ineffectiveness. This kind of story appeared in almost 50 percent of articles in our media sample (and 17 percent in organizational materials). While several articles referred explicitly to the system as "in crisis," journalists also evoked this frame using other terms, describing a system that is "broken," in "chaos," or "failing." This kind of narrative portrays the system as facing insurmountable problems—a place where youth have little chance of developing the skills they need to thrive as adults. Within this broader "system in crisis" narrative, researchers identified two more specific sets of stories:

- **The system is overstretched and overworked.** One set focused on how professionals in the foster care system, especially social workers and system administrators, lack the resources to perform their jobs effectively. (As one article put it, frontline staff were "buried under caseloads" caused by a "capacity crisis.")[7] Insufficient funding was portrayed as a major impediment to providing the supports and services that children in the system need. Importantly, these stories did not assign blame to system professionals but rather to the external constraints (e.g., political will) that dictate levels of funding and how they are allocated:

  > State social workers in Hilo oversee so many cases of abused and neglected children spread over a huge swath of Hawaii island that the situation has become a crisis, with workers unable to devote adequate time to cases even as the numbers continue to grow, according to social workers, foster parents, service providers and others familiar with the child welfare system there.[8]

  > Pervasive problems with Superior's health care management are worsening the state's already troubled child-welfare system, a News investigation found. The company's refusals to cover medical costs, from inexpensive diapers to costly treatments, have made some foster parents' tough jobs nearly impossible.[9]

- **The system is dysfunctional and ineffective.** A second set characterized the child welfare system as bureaucratic, inefficient, and siloed. These stories often used sensationalized language to show how the child welfare system fails to safeguard those in its charge due to basic incompetence. They tended to focus on cases of abuse and neglect in foster care that went undetected by government agencies, as is reflected in the following excerpts:

> The state's child-welfare system has been dysfunctional for years, so much so that a federal court recently found that neglected and abused children were often worse off when they left foster care than when they came in. Children are often shuffled from home to home, and thus doctor to doctor, making it hard to ensure consistent and adequate health care.[10]

> It's enough to turn your stomach. A little girl, left to fend for herself in the home of a pedophile, whose hobby was apparently child pornography. Rescued eventually, then left to fend for herself in a home where she was burned so badly that her injuries will affect the rest of her life. And the worst of it? This girl wasn't born into such barbarism. No, she was put there by the Arizona Department of Child Safety, despite warnings that the foster homes were no place for kids. This, according to an explosive lawsuit filed on behalf of the now 6-year-old.[11]

The tone in both sets is overwhelmingly negative. Readers are left with little understanding of what kinds of reforms are needed and how they would support youth and society more generally; indeed, readers have only the sense that the child welfare system is incapable of addressing the needs of American children.

Implications

Journalists understandably want to discuss the severity of problems facing the child welfare system. However, crisis messaging *without* clear and consistent explanations of solutions leaves the public with the sense that such problems can't be fixed. These types of stories reinforce the public's existing sense of fatalism about the child welfare system and inhibit productive discussion of how it can be improved.

Each version of the "system in crisis" narrative has different implications for public thinking. Stories about an underfunded system are more promising. These stories spotlight the role of resources and systems in shaping child and adolescent outcomes. Yet they do not make the case for better funding, much less explain how, with appropriate funding, to improve the system. As such, these stories will likely leave readers convinced that problems with the system are intractable; if they were extended to paint a vision of reform, they would help people understand the urgency of the problem while also building understanding of solutions and support for change.

The second set of stories is more problematic. As prior FrameWorks' research has shown, this framing will likely activate the public's understanding that government is ineffective, corrupt, and wasteful.[12] As a

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result, these types of stories will likely cultivate the sense that trying to reform the system is a waste of time: if the government is the cause of the problem, then how can it also be the solution?

Individual stories dominate media coverage of the child welfare system.

Media coverage of foster care, and child welfare issues more broadly, is dominated by episodic storytelling.[13] That is, the media largely ignore discussions of the issue at the population level. Most articles "zoom in" on the trials and tribulations of individual actors and pay little attention to the environments and systems in which individuals are embedded. Qualitative analysis of media articles revealed a set of distinct story types present in the data. Each has different implications for public thinking and understanding.

- **The "hero caregiver" story.** In this story type, exceptional caregiving is portrayed as a form of heroic sacrifice. These stories focus on selfless and devoted individuals, typically foster parents, who put children's needs before their own. In these stories, good outcomes for youth are typically characterized as the result of specific individuals' selflessness.

   > Susan Vrenios held the baby boy, less than 6 months old, in her arms as the infant cooed and flashed his big, heart-melting smile. Over the span of nearly 30 years as a foster parent in Hawthorn Woods, Illinois, Vrenios has become a pro at tending to infants and children in the care of the state. Vrenios and her husband, Tom, so far have touched the lives of 132 kids, including two children the couple adopted into their family. … Foster parenting seemed to come to Vrenios naturally, she said. "We had no children of our own and we felt very blessed by life. We wanted to give back, so we decided to become foster parents, and one child led to 132," Vrenios said.[14]

   > CASA program director Charlotte Caples, who is Salmon's CASA manager, said her biggest strength is her persistence. "She never gives up on a child," Caples said. "She knows how a CASA Volunteer can impact a child within the child protection system and she is willing to give all of herself to make that difference."[15]

- **The "bootstraps" story.** These stories describe the drive and determination of specific individuals—including foster youth, but also birth parents—to overcome challenges in their lives. They tend to portray external factors (e.g., social supports, resources) as less important than character and willpower. Framed this way, the effects of trauma are typically viewed as something to be overcome through effort, not as a disruption to the

developmental process or a mental health condition that requires specific services or supports.

> Steve Pemberton was a forgotten child, abused and neglected and kept under the thumb of a punishingly cruel foster family in Massachusetts. Through sheer force of will, he decided to get revenge on the family that told him he was worthless by setting his sights on achievement.[16]

> On the walls, words to inspire strength and perseverance were painted in bright, primary colors: "I am a survivor." "My determination outweighs my situation." Painted sunflowers with pictures of children inside them are meant to give the women hope as they navigate their Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous meetings and skills-training groups.[17]

- **The "bad apple" story.** A final set of stories focuses on a set of bad actors within the system, including cruel, greedy foster carers and neglectful, "drug-ravaged" biological parents. In these stories, solutions center on holding individuals criminally accountable or shielding children from harm through surveillance. The following article, for example, recounts the public outcry toward the perceived leniency of a jail sentence for an abusive foster parent:

> A boy was found chained with a dead chicken around his neck. Now he's suing his foster mother. "He requires a lot of therapy and, of course, the love of his mother," a family attorney said of the North Carolina boy, who has been reunited with his mom. In 2015, Larson was sentenced to a maximum of 17 months behind bars—a sentence that ignited emotional protests in Union County; adults criticized officials for "lax" standards on child abuse, and a child waved a sign proclaiming "My Life Matters," according to the *Charlotte Observer*. "Seventeen months is not enough justice for the kids," the boy's biological mother, Maria Harris, told NBC affiliate WCNC.[18]

Implications

The preponderance of individual stories about resilient children, determined parents, and "superhero" carers further ingrains the public's assumption that people's choices and willpower are the primary causal explanations for individual outcomes (what FrameWorks refers to as the *Self-Makingness* cultural model).[19] Narratives about "overcoming the odds" or going "above and beyond" make it easy to laud individuals—but hard to appreciate how contexts enable and/or facilitate positive outcomes.

These "bootstraps" and "hero caregiver" stories portray successful individuals as disconnected from wider systems of support, such as access to social networks, services, education, and training. As a result, journalists reinforce the public's tendency to overlook the role of systemic factors in shaping individual development and behavior. What's worse, they convey an implicit message that *un*successful people lack the appropriate level of drive, determination, and/or concern. This further stigmatizes key actors in the child welfare system, notably children and parents.

The "bad apple" story reinforces the assumptions that (1) youth outcomes are a function of individual choices and character and (2) most foster carers are motivated by financial gain or, worse, the desire to prey on children (what FrameWorks refers to as the *Bad Motives* cultural model). These stories amplify cynicism about the system and make people think that the child welfare system at best keeps children safe and at worst, actually endangers them. Enrichment and active promotion of positive development, in other words, are out of reach.

Neither field organizations nor the news media focus on or explain disparities in foster care.

In earlier research on expert and public thinking about foster care, experts explained that disparities in who enters the system reflect structural inequities in power, money, and other resources. The state is more likely to intervene in families from marginalized groups and with children with marginalized identities, including children of color, children living in poverty, children with disabilities, and those who identify as LGBTQ.

Nevertheless, neither the media nor the field include much demographic information about *who* enters the system. Only 19 percent of organizational materials and 18 percent of media stories include information about the race or ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic status, or sexual or gender identity of children and adolescents within foster care, either at the individual- or at the population-level (Table 2).

Table 2: Mention of demographic groups within materials

CODE	PERCENT OF MEDIA ARTICLES	PERCENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL MATERIALS
Children or adolescents of color	6.3	9.8
Children or adolescents from immigrant families	4.9	2.7
Male children or adolescents	4.4	0.9
Female children or adolescents	7.3	2.7
LGBTQ children or adolescents	2.9	4.5
Children or adolescents from low-income families	6.3	4.5
Children or adolescents with disabilities	9.3	8.9

Materials that *do* incorporate such information rarely address disparities *between* groups; and, those that do address disparities rarely explain why they exist. More commonly, they simply cite statistics, such as this one from a foster care advocacy organization: "In 2014, more than half of children entering US foster care were young people of color."[20]

Implications

Because media and organizational communications don't mention that certain racial, socioeconomic, and identity groups are disproportionately represented in the system, the public is not being informed about these disparities. What's more, the lack of explanation about the causes of disparities leaves the public to fall back on toxic, racialized assumptions—like the idea that low-income Black communities have "bad values" and consider child abuse and drug addiction as "normal."

In other words, when confronted with unexplained or unframed statistics about disparities in involvement with the care system, people will likely blame marginalized families and communities. Communicators, in other words, are missing an important opportunity to help people understand why disparities exist, such as the fact that poverty makes it more difficult to meet children's basic needs in a range of ways and that implicit biases increase the likelihood that children in marginalized families will be referred to state departments of child protective services.

FINDING #4

Media and organizational materials rarely describe how the wellbeing of foster youth impacts society as a whole.

As earlier research showed, experts have established that the wellbeing of foster youth has important social, economic, and public health consequences for society. However, media and organizational discourse rarely discuss the societal consequences of entry into foster care (Table 3). Only 24 percent of media and 19 percent of field materials noted effects on the health care, juvenile justice, social welfare, or economic systems. In contrast, a much greater proportion of articles described the *individual-level* consequences of foster care, such as the increased likelihood of mental or physical illness, victimization, homelessness, or poverty (69 percent by the media, and 75 percent by the field).

Table 3: Systemic and Societal-Level Effects of Foster Care

SOCIETAL CONSEQUENCES	PERCENT OF MEDIA ARTICLES	PERCENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL MATERIALS
Criminal justice system	7.6	4.5
Health care system	2.8	1.8
Social welfare system	16.2	10.8
Economy	10.7	8.1

Implications

While FrameWorks' research has found that members of the public understand to some extent that inadequate support for foster youth creates *costs* for society, people do not understand how a better system will produce economic, civic, and social *gains* for society as a whole. In focusing mostly on individual-level consequences, media and organizational materials fail to bridge this gap in public thinking. As a result, these communications miss the opportunity to build public understanding of important reasons to pursue reform.

FINDING #5

Transition age youth *are* on the radar.

A surprising finding of this research is the extent to which the media and field organizations *do* include information about transition age youth in their communications. In total, 37 percent of advocacy materials and 20 percent of media stories mention this group in some fashion.

However, while media stories regularly *mention* youth aging out of the system, they rarely build an understanding of these youth as a distinct group or elaborate on the challenges they face and the supports they need. For example, one news article described a range of system-reform recommendations put forward in a report submitted to Texas' Department of Family and Protective Services. Buried under a long list of suggested policies is the following sentence:

> Additionally, the recommendations include a call for new programs to help foster children succeed in life after they "age out" of the system at 18, along with better health care plans, and improved tracking of youths' progress while in the program.[21]

Another story about a specific child adopted by his foster family makes only passing mention of transition age youth:

> More than 2,300 children are in foster care in Cuyahoga County—520 of them are in the county's permanent custody. Of those, half are in the process of being adopted, while the rest are in a holding pattern, often waiting until they reach 18 and age out of the system altogether. Their stories, those with both happy and sad endings, are usually confined to county files and courtrooms, where they escape public attention.[22]

These excerpts illustrate reporters' tendency to *allude* to transition age youth but to *leave out* meaningful discussions of their needs. Indeed, transitioning out of the foster care system was rarely the primary topic of articles in the sample. Those that did mention transition age youth lacked the specificity and concreteness required to increase the salience of transition age youth among members of the public or help them understand how to best support them.

In contrast, when discussions of transition age youth were present in field communications, they were significantly more likely to be accompanied by an explanation of youth's developmental needs, as well as specific, actionable solutions to address them. Table 4 shows that organizational materials frequently couple discussions of transition age youth with solutions, such as increasing vocational, financial, educational, and housing supports and increasing eligibility of services beyond the age of 18.

Table 4: Mention of Solutions among Articles Discussing Transition Age Youth

CODE	PERCENT OF MEDIA ARTICLES	PERCENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL MATERIALS
Extend eligibility of services beyond age 18	17.9	29.2
Increase vocational supports (e.g., job placement or training)	10.7	33.3
Increase financial supports (e.g., monetary allowance)	7.1	10.4
Increase educational supports (e.g., tuition waivers, campus services)	10.7	33.3
Increase housing supports	17.9	25.0
Promote collaboration between child- and adult-serving systems	1.8	8.3

The following organizational document profiles a care-leaver. In this description, the article both explains the problem (lack of financial support) and provides an appropriate solution (monetary support for educational expenses).

> Health care is not the only resource that assists with aging out; funds for secondary education help as well. Most former foster youth don't age out with tons of money. I left care with less than $500 in my bank account. Luckily, when youth age out they have the option to use Education and Training Voucher (ETV) funds that supply us with money to help pay for schooling.[23]

This type of article places successful transition age youth in context, describing how effective policies and programs scaffold independence and other aspects of development.

Implications

The prevalence of discussions about transition age youth is promising. Earlier stages of research show that the public does not generally recognize transition age youth as a discrete group that warrants specific attention and investment, yet discussions of this group are vital to build understanding. However, while the *field* is offering a robust understanding of what youth need as they leave the system, this perspective is less consistently present in the media. Increasing public understanding of transition age youth requires media coverage that not only mentions this population but also explains their specific needs and how they can be met.

FINDING 6

Media and organizational materials focus heavily on the negative outcomes associated with foster care experience.

As experts note, foster youth have the same potential and aspirations as all youth and, with the right supports and services, have the ability to transition into successful, thriving adults. However, materials in our sample tended to emphasize the *negative* effects of care experience. As shown in Table 5, discussions across media and organizational materials focused on negative outcomes, such as substance use disorders, mental health problems, involvement with the juvenile justice system, homelessness, and ill health. They mentioned positive outcomes for foster youth, such as learning and growth, less frequently.

Table 5: Individual-Level Outcomes (Positive and Negative)

Area of Focus	PERCENT OF MEDIA ARTICLES		PERCENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL MATERIALS	
	Positive effect mentioned	Negative effect mentioned	Positive effect mentioned	Negative effect mentioned
Criminality	1.5	8.8	1.8	14.3
Mental health	7.3	22.0	10.7	23.2
Physical health	4.9	18.5	1.8	14.3
Education	4.9	9.3	25.0	24.1
Employment	1	2.9	11.6	16.1
Relationships	6.3	7.3	9.8	7.1
Homelessness	2.0	7.3	8.9	16.1

In the media, the focus on negative outcomes is mostly clearly seen in the pejorative language used to describe foster youth, such as that they are "troubled" or "broken." The tone of media stories about negative outcomes was fatalistic, describing them as inevitable. The following excerpts typify articles about the negative trajectories of foster youth:

> Angel had recently run away from an emergency shelter at a Child Protective Services office in Houston, where she had been placed because the state had nowhere else to put her. As a special investigator with the Department of Family and Protective Services, [Shitonda Johnson] had seen what happens to runaway foster kids. Pimps eager to lure them into prostitution. Men who offer help but deliver sexual assault. A swift descent into homelessness and hunger. Johnson braced herself for Angel's story. They run because they are angry, because they miss their families, because they chafe at rules, because they are in bad foster homes. Because years of trauma can carve indelible scars.[24]

> By the time Naika ended her life in January, she had bounced between foster homes, group homes and shelters more than a dozen times, starting from the age of 6. According to a report from state child welfare officials, the teen was suffering under a dysfunctional and abusive relationship with her mother and was failed by a foster care system that was unable to meet the needs of a severely traumatized child. The Florida Department of Children and Families report, released this week, talks about a girl who slept in the same bed as her mother's boyfriends and watched "sex movies." It paints a heartbreaking portrait of a girl who was neglected and abused very early in life.[25]

In these articles, the implicit (and at times, explicit) assumption is that once negative experiences become developmentally embedded, little can be done to address them. Organizational materials, in contrast, tended to use less emotive language, instead relying on facts and statistics to draw attention to the scope and scale of the problem.

> Foster children who "age out" of the system without having been adopted are more likely to become homeless, incarcerated and/or rely on government assistance. According to a 2010 study by the Universities of Chicago and Washington, nearly 30,000 youth age out of the U.S. foster care system annually without the emotional and financial support necessary to succeed. University researchers interviewed groups of former foster children who had aged-out of the system during a period of several years, and this is what they found: Nearly 40% had been homeless or couch surfed; almost 60% of young men had been convicted of a crime; only 48% were employed; 75% of women and 33% of men receive government benefits to meet basic needs; 17% of the females were pregnant.[26]

These types of statistics are typically presented without explanation. The excerpt above, for example, does not explain *why* those who age out of the system are at risk for poor outcomes or *how* foster youth can overcome traumatic experiences.

Implications

The near-exclusive focus on negative outcomes paints a vivid mental image of youth in foster care—one in which trauma and system-involvement leave permanent marks that cannot be erased. And, while this idea is evoked most strongly and problematically in the media, it is also present in field communications. By portraying foster youth as "troubled," communicators reinforce the public's assumption that they are "damaged goods" with little hope for success in life. By centering coverage on the negative outcomes associated with foster experience, such as criminal behavior, mental and physical illness, unemployment, and homelessness, media and organizational narratives cue and reinforce the stigmatizing images of foster youth that the public holds in mind.

FINDING 7

Foster youth *are* represented in media and organizational materials— but in different ways.

Messengers—the people or organizations communicating about an issue or relaying information or evidence about it—are important elements of a narrative because they help contextualize the message. In our sample, 21 percent of organizational materials and 18 percent of media stories quoted individuals who are currently or who have previously been in foster care.

The ways in which youth were used as messengers differed in important ways between the media and organizational discourse. In media articles, current and ex-foster youth often recounted the most harrowing experiences of their lives. These quotes were seemingly designed to elicit the reader's sympathy for their plight. Consider, for example, the following excerpts from news stories:

> Brianna Watkins, a former foster child who is now a freshman attending Texas A&M University, knows firsthand what it is like to feel hopeless and alone. "Some of the struggles I experienced in foster care personally was finding hope and knowing my self-worth," Watkins said. "In foster care I felt as though I were a pay check more than I was a child and that left me with an extremely low self-esteem. As time went on I had little to no hope that I would ever be adopted and so gradually stopped trying to make any meaningful connections."[27]

> Lara B. Sharp, a successful writer who grew up in foster care, says that of the foster children she knew, "all went either missing or they died, mostly before age 18." Sharp told me of three different times workers misplaced her. This happened when she was moved from one home to another, and no one updated her file. Had she been kidnapped or run away during these times, no one would have known. She would have fallen through cracks in the system so wide they are canyons.[28]

In organizational materials, foster youth were used as messengers in a more constructive way, offering testimony to explain the value and impact of programs and policies in supporting positive developmental outcomes and illustrating the role that care-experienced individuals can play in supporting peers and communities. In one article, an organization profiled the work of an ex-foster youth who now advocates for young people as they exit the child welfare system and learn to navigate the adult world:

> "When foster children leave the system they get first dibs on public housing, but let's face it, who really escapes the projects?" Gilmore shared candidly. "In a good neighborhood, no one wants to rent to an 18-year-old, let alone a former foster youth. I see all these abandoned homes around Cleveland and my vision is to create a community with homes that provide decent housing and much-needed support for a lot of kids."[29]

In another, an organization turned to a young adult with experience in foster care to provide a testimonial for a program for transition age youth:

> For high school students involved in the child welfare system, The Foundling's Road to Success program matches teens with a private tutor who helps them in all areas of school and classwork […] "Because of the Foundling, I am able to go to college and achieve my goals," says Emahni, a student with Road to Success who just finished her first semester at Guttman College.[30]

As exemplified by these passages, organizational materials using youth as messengers were considerably more likely than the media to show them in a positive light—as actively contributing to their communities, thriving, or benefiting from effective programs and policies.

Implications

The inclusion of youth as messengers in communications is both important and promising. Helping members of the public better understand foster youth's experience and perspectives will reduce stigma and prompt conversations about how to best support foster youth's development. In addition, including foster youth in communications positions them as needed partners in system reform.

However, communicators must exercise caution and sensitivity when incorporating or mobilizing these voices. The selective way in which the news media incorporate voices of foster youth will likely reinforce stigma about foster youth and fatalism about system reform. Organizational materials are more productive because they give foster youth a platform to communicate about their needs and the kinds of policies and programs that support them.

Recommendations

Communicators must take specific steps to address the limitations and opportunities presented by current media coverage and organizational discourse. Shifting public discourse about foster care and foster youth is a challenging task. However, as FrameWorks' research on similar issues has shown, an effective core story that is consistently disseminated by multiple stakeholders and backed by influential organizations can bring about significant changes in public conversation over time.[31] The following recommendations, informed by findings from this research and from earlier phases of this project, offer initial strategies for shifting communications practice.

1. **Frame foster care as a social issue.** Members of the public need to be reminded that the wellbeing of foster youth matters to all of society—that it is a *social* issue. In the absence of statements about the collective importance and impact of improving the foster care system, the public will likely view it as an issue of individual rather than public concern. Across many issue areas, FrameWorks' research has demonstrated the power of shared values to activate this sense of collective responsibility. If advocates can connect the dots between the immediate, personal impact of care experience and broader, societal goals, they will be better able to build support for broad-scale change.

2. **Rebalance the discussion about outcomes.** Media and field communications reinforce the public's assumption that foster youth are destined for bad outcomes as a result of the trauma they have endured. Discussion of negative outcomes must be complemented with stories that show young people's potential for resilience and positive adaptation. Critically, these stories should inoculate against the belief that resilient outcomes are the exclusive result of willpower and drive. Instead, they must tell an "ecological" story that focuses on how resilient outcomes are supported by positive environments and societal resources.

3. **Provide examples of effective interventions and programs.** Members of the public are fed a steady diet of media stories about the negligence, inefficiency, and ineffectiveness of the child welfare system. While communicators understandably want to call attention to the fact that the system is failing many children and families, they must be careful to avoid reinforcing the public's fatalism. In order to build collective efficacy, they should provide concrete examples of effective interventions and policies and explain how they produce good outcomes. Field organizations are beginning to adopt this approach but need to make this strategy stick in the media.

4. **Explain the unique challenges faced by transition age youth and how they can be overcome.** Our analysis revealed one particularly promising finding: in both media and organizational materials, communicators *do* mention transition age youth. Communicators nevertheless have a long way to go. To truly increase understanding of transition age youth, communicators need not merely to mention these youth but to explain their needs and how to meet them with effective interventions, programs, and policies. Communicators need to tell complete stories that document the problems facing those leaving care (building urgency about the situation) while explaining how these problems can be addressed (building efficacy about solutions).

5. **Continue to elevate the voices and perspectives of those with foster care experience— in the right ways**. Another promising finding was the extent to which organizations include the voices of foster youth in productive ways. In this context, transition age youth must be represented as individuals with agency rather than as passive victims of life events outside of their control. Like other frame elements, messengers shape how members of the public understand and interpret messages, which helps them answer questions like: "Who says this is a problem and why should I pay attention to it?" and "How do I know a source is credible?" Communicators should find opportunities to include youth perspectives whenever possible.

6. **Highlight disparities in the foster care system and explain why they exist.** To build understanding of why certain groups are overrepresented in the child welfare system, communicators must not only talk about the full range of disparities but also explain why they exist. This includes explanations of how biases against marginalized groups increase the likelihood that children in marginalized families will enter—and remain in—the system.

7. **Place individual stories in a systemic context.** The media (and to a lesser extent, the field) frequently tell individual stories to emotionally engage their audiences. When properly framed, individual stories are effective, but they must be put in a broader narrative that brings into view the systems-level dimensions of foster issues and the policy changes required to improve outcomes. If they don't include this perspective, communicators may invigorate the tendency to explain outcomes in terms of characteristics of individual people rather than in terms of systems and structures.
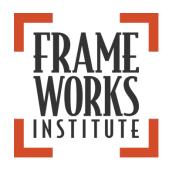
Conclusion

To bring about lasting reforms to the foster care system, including measures to support young people as they come of age, advocates need to build the public's understanding of what foster care is and how it can be improved. Shifting these opinions requires first understanding the communications landscape in which advocates operate. In documenting media and organizational storytelling practices, this report takes an important step toward this goal.

The analysis reveals a consistent and identifiable media script about foster care. This script portrays the system as being in perpetual crisis and portrays children with care experience as irreparably damaged and parents of children in foster care as generally cruel. The media position this as an issue that is relevant only for affected children and their families and pay little attention to the ways in which the wellbeing of foster youth has broader economic, health, and civic implications. Together, these narratives reinforce the idea that the foster care system is a problem about which nothing can or should be done.

Organizational discourse is more promising. In some important ways, the field is already communicating about foster care in ways likely to effectively get across the expert perspective. Compared to the media, the field engages in a more substantive discussion of transition age youth and explains the policies and programs that can best support them. It also elevates the voices and perspectives of those with experience in the system, typically in ways that show them as agentic, resilient individuals who contribute to their communities. However, organizations highlight the negative outcomes associated with care experience, which is likely to reinforce fatalism, and fail to explain disparities in foster care and the collective impacts of foster care, which means they are not displacing toxic stereotypes or promoting a truly collective orientation toward the issue.

This view of the discursive environment highlights the need for new frames that can reshape the public's dominant ways of thinking about transition age youth and the foster care system. In later stages of this project, FrameWorks will develop narrative strategies that can help experts, advocates, and media communicators move the public discourse in productive directions. These strategies will make it possible to produce a more favorable climate for reform and culture change and ensure that foster youth have the resources they need to thrive.

About the FrameWorks Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by framing the public discourse about social problems. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis®, a multimethod, multidisciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, conducts, publishes, explains, and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, build public will, and further public understanding of specific social issues—the environment, government, race, children's issues, and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth—ranging from qualitative, quantitative, and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, eWorkshops, advertising campaigns, FrameChecks®, and in-depth FrameLab study engagements. In 2015, it was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Foundation's Award for Creative & Effective Institutions. Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with the FrameWorks Institute as publisher.

Busso, D., Down, L., Gibbons, C., & Volmert, A. (2018). *Stuck in Crisis: Media and organizational discourse on foster care and transition age youth.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

Endnotes

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